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The Years of Writing Dangerously: Salman Rushdie and the Fatwa Twenty Years After

The aim of this paper is not to deal with the so-called Rushdie affair and the chronicle of the "unfunny Valentine" that overnight changed a writer into a martyr for freedom. I will concentrate instead on how the cultural world reacted to the fatwa at the time, and how Western intellectuals (and Rushdie first among them) reconsidered it – and redefined the concept of 'freedom' - in the light of 9/11.

To start with, I think it is interesting to have a look at a short piece on the casualties of censorship that Rushdie wrote in 1983 for the *Index on Censorhip*. Here, more than five years before himself becoming a victim of cultural intolerance, Rushdie affirmed that "the worst, most insidious effect of censorship is that, in the end, it can deaden the imagination of the people …" because "[w]here there is no debate, it is hard to go on remembering, every day, that there is a suppressed side to every argument".[1] Not by chance, after the fatwa one of the main concerns of Rushdie's fellow writers and readers was to be constantly calling his case to the attention of the general public, starting from the *Festchrift* that some of the leading figures of British and American culture put together for *The New Statesman and Society*, only a fortnight after Khomeini's death sentence. Authors like Margaret Atwood, Harold Pinter, Colin McCabe, Nadine Gordimer, Joseph Brodsky, Thomas Pynchon, Ralph Ellison, Derek Walcott, Martin Amis, Octavio Paz and many others gave their contributions for free to support the cause of freedom of speech. As the British novelist and broadcaster Melvyn Bragg commented, the Rushdie affair created a global community of authors. "It is difficult to think of any writer who has provoked such a closing of ranks", Bragg wrote in the *Festschrift*, "His isolation has triggered our sense of common purpose. In Britain in particular, it has encouraged and enabled writers at last to break through that barrier which forbade them to be serious in public on public matters".[2] Almost all the contributors to the *New Statesman Festschrift* stress the necessity of freedom of speech and horror at Khomeini's threat, feeling themselves menaced by "the corrupt barbarity of the capitalist west, and the anger and terror of the Muslim east", in Fay Weldon's words (*F*, 30). Yet only two film directors, Stephen Frears and the late Derek Jarman, try to take into account also the reasons of the Other, the first stressing that "What matters is ... writers ... being able to write what they want ... and Muslims being listened to when they want to say something"(*F*, 25), and the second underlining the problem that "Nothing anyone can say will influence

[1] Salman Rushdie, "Casualties of Censorship", in George Theiner, ed., *They Shoot Writers, Don't They?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 87.

[2] Melvin Bragg in "Words for Rushdie", *New Statesman and Society* (31 March 1989), 24. Page references to contributions published in the *Festschrift* are henceforth referred to in the text as *F*.

religious demagoguery …" because "[w]ith all religions one is dealing with the irrational, particularly Christianity"(*F*, 29).

Within a few months, in the wake of these and other pronouncements of intellectuals, politicians and artists, an "International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie and his Publishers" was founded: by the 4th of July 1989, 12,000 writers and readers had signed a world statement declaring that they too were involved in the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, "insofar as [they] defend the right to freedom of opinion and expression as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights".[3] "We are all Salman Rushdie" seems to be the motto of the undersigned: "We are involved, whether we approve the contents of the book or not", claims the "World Statement", "We call upon world opinion to support the right of all people to express their ideas and beliefs and to discuss them with their critics on the basis of mutual tolerance, free from censorship, intimidation and violence"(5). From this moment on, the Rushdie affair will be interpreted in the West mainly as a matter of 'our' freedom threatened by 'their' fanaticism, thus leading to the transformation of Rushdie himself into a living martyr, to use a pregnant definition by Norman Mailer.

Five years later, replying to an almost hopeless Rushdie, who, on Valentine's Day 1993, intimated to his supporters: "You must decide what you think a writer is worth, what value you place on a maker of stories and an arguer with the world",[4] twenty-six of the world's most important writers wrote letters to the author of *The Satanic Verses*, confirming their support and their sympathy with him and his situation. "I am trying to live your daily anxieties and illusory hopes with you", states Günther Grass (*TRL* 30), while Mario Vargas Llosa observes that, since "in a world where blackmail silences writers, literature could not exist", "It is our obligation as writers ... to maintain our indignation and protest alive" (96). Not very differently, Nadine Gordimer affirms that: "the fatwa ... is a crime against humanity that also casts a shadow over the free development of literature everywhere" (45), while Graham Swift, wondering "How scant the stock of literature would be if all the books that had occasioned offence had been excluded from it", concludes with this exclamation: "How poor and mean a world that would so prescribe and proscribe"(64). These kinds of comments lead to the ultimate metamorphosis of Rushdie, a man who has "made history which in turn is making [him]" (37), according to Arnold Wesker; "no longer a person", as Peter Carey observes, he becomes "an apparition, less than an apparition – an idea"(51). Therefore, if Abraham B. Yehoshua reflects that with his "Iranian" story, Rushdie has shown that "literature should be also a dangerous thing, a thing that speaks the truth" (94), Wesker can end his letter by addressing him as "a hero of our time"(37).

In a similar collection of essays in defence of Rushdie, put together the same year by Arab and Muslim intellectuals, the tone is less emphatic. The

[3] "World Statement" reported in The International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie and His Publishers, *Writers and Readers in Support of Salman Rushdie* (London: The International Salman Rushdie Committee, 1989), 5.

[4] Salman Rushdie, "One Thousand Days in a Balloon", in Steve MacDonogh, ed., *The Rushdie Letters: Freedom to Speak, Freedom to Write* (London: Brandon, 1993), 24. Further references to *The Rushdie Letters* are henceforth referred to in the text as *TRL*.

stress is on the dangers of story-telling, and the respect of freedom more than on the difficulty of Rushdie's situation. While Edward Said positions himself among the heartiest paladins of Rushdie, whom he considers "the *intifada* of the imagination",[5] many other intellectuals who contribute to this project underline Western prejudices against Islam and the wrongs of the Western press and media with regard to the Rushdie crisis. In this way, while Tahar Ben Jelloun stresses that even if "A book ... can irritate and annoy, stir people up, even do harm ... [it] should never be the pretext for an incitement to murder" (110), Assia Djebar addresses Rushdie as "the first *man* to have to live in the condition of a Muslim *woman*" (125). Yet it is in the essays of authors such as Orhan Pamuk and Amin Maalouf that we hear, clearly, the voice of the Other. The first writes:

> The death sentence ... sets in motion a double mechanism and provides satisfaction for two interested parties. On the one hand, it establishes the image of a 'fanatical Islam' in Western public opinion; on the other hand, in Muslim countries ... it reinforces the judgement that the West sees in Islam nothing but fanaticism. ... The whole Rushdie affair, we should not forget, is a media phenomenon serving vulgar, violent, authoritarian, imperialistic, and antidemocratic interests in both of the two camps. We should not therefore fail to see that the tragedy of this individual writer, intrepid and authentic as he is, is our tragedy too.(247-248)

And the latter echoes him, almost prophetically:

> The essential problem remains, that which makes a Rushdie affair possible in our days. I want to talk about the fact that a billion Muslims have the impression of living in a foreign, hostile, indecipherable universe. They no longer even dare hope for a better life, in freedom and dignity; they wonder how they can be integrated into the modern world without losing their souls. For them it is an anguishing dilemma indeed, and also for the whole humanity, because it brings with it heartbreak and violence. Until it is resolved, other dramas await us, before which we will also be impotent.(216)

With September 11, 2001, the 'we-are-all-Salman Rushdie' attitude turns into an I-am-Rushdie' stance. While shortly after the fatwa declaring one was co-responsible in the diffusion of *The Satanic Verses* was a symbolic way of defying the tyranny of the Iranian Ayatollahs and supporting the man they had condemned to death, after the tragedy of the Twin Towers "the nine years of solitary dread inflicted on Rushdie ... turned out to be the private *hors d'oeuvre* to an all-comers' feast of hatred and horror",[6] as a journalist of the *Independent* wrote. As for Rushdie himself, a cause célèbre from 1989, he turned into a reluctant free-speech martyr after 1998, when the fatwa was withdrawn, only to be forced again into a public role after 2001, as a symbol of freedom, the man about town paradoxically "beatified by the fatwa", as Vikram Seth has written. Not by

[5] Edward W. Said, "Against the Orthodoxies", in Anouar Abdallah, ed., *For Rushdie. Essays by Arab and Muslim Writers in Defense of Free Speech* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 261.

[6] Boyd Tonkin, "Paradise postponed", *The Independent* (9 September 2005). All the review and interview quotations referring to *Shalimar the Clown* come from the March 2006 press review provided by Rushdie's Italian publisher Arnoldo Mondadori. Page numbers inserted hereafter in parenthesis refer to the Mondadori press review.

chance, the protagonist of his post-9/11 novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, is a tightrope walker, whose life – like that of his creator – is suspended between East and West, safety and terrorism. Yet what intrigues most in Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* is the representation of a restricted world, made up by interconnected local realities where all the great abstractions of politics find a place. Rushdie justifies this entanglement of sites and stories with the following explanation:

> When I wrote *Midnight's Children* I felt able to focus my story on a place, the Indian subcontinent, and didn't feel the need to encompass any elsewheres. Since then I have begun to feel more and more that because of many things – mass migration, international mayhem, economic globalisation – the world's stories are no longer separate but commingled, and have set myself the challenge of exploring the literary consequences of taking on this new frontierless world.[7]

[7] S. Prasannarajan, "Interview. Salman Rushdie: 'Greed Killed Kashmir'", *India Today* (12 September 2005).

The result is a novel where the whole world is seen as a village, so that, "no matter where you are ... everyone and everything has a connection …" and "[e]verybody's story is running into everybody else's story".[8] As Rushdie himself has admitted, his purpose with *Shalimar the Clown* was to investigate a new type of fiction capable of reflecting today's 'shrinking' of the planet, the idea that everything is connected, so that, the world being much 'smaller' than it was a quarter of a century ago, stories springing from the furthest parts of the globe belong to the same history. "Everywhere was now a part of everything else", we read in the novel, "Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete".[9]

[8] Ginny Dougary, "The Incredible Lightness of Salman", *Times Online* (20 August 2005).

[9] Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* (London: Cape, 2005), 37.

The nearest model for this kind of narration seems not to be found in literature but in the cinema, in the works, for instance, of the Mexican director Alejandro Gonzalez Iñarritu. Those who have seen his 2006 tour-de-force *Babel* will surely remember how several stories of solitude, loss and lack of communication, taking place at the four corners of the world, are intertwined and related by way of a series of narrative geometries, cross-references, agreements, building a complex framework of interlocked patterns.

As in Iñarritu's films, in *Shalimar the Clown* personal experiences bleed into political actions. Moreover, the menace of radical extremism and terrorism are implicitly observed through the lenses of Rushdie's past experiences which, he admits, "gave [him] an interior viewpoint on that world before other people".[10] Dealing with the loss of tolerance and secular pluralism in Kashmir, once the archetype of such imaginary earthly paradises as the mythical Shangri-La, then the site of greedy invaders and Islamic pogroms, and today the battlefield where tensions between India and Pakistan are heightened by the recruiting of the valley's youth for al-Qaeda terrorist training camps, Rushdie depicts a non-Miltonian Paradise

[10] Thierry Gandillot, "Salman Rushdie – 'Aucun auteur ne devrait être aussi connu comme je le suis'", *L'Express* (29 September 2005), (my translation).

lost. As he explained to the American writer Paul Auster in a double interview for *Le Nouvel Observateur*:

> This dream-like Kashmir becomes a kind of Paradise Lost, but not in the sense of Milton, who developed the Christian idea of the human fall of man. Here, I am dealing with the real destruction of this Paradise, ruined by bombs and cannons, as if many armies invaded the garden of Eden to lay it waste. In a way, the destruction of this Paradise is the key idea of the novel. We live in a world without Paradises and we must learn to live without this idea of a better world.[11]

[11] Salman Rushdie in Didier Jacob, "Auster et Rushdie: rencontre au sommet", *Le Nouvel Observateur* (1 November 2005), (my translation).

Yet, even more than by bombs and wars, Rushdie's Kashmir is ravaged by a battle between memory and history. If in *The Moor's Last Sigh* – a novel that in many ways anticipated some themes of *Shalimar* – Rushdie wrote that "The end of a world is not the end of the world",[12] here he seems to imply that the end of certain worlds – dreamlike places, imaginary homelands, invisible cities – 'is' the end, at least of one world: the world of innocence. As Christopher Hitchens has observed: "Rushdie is telling us, No more Macondos. No more Shangri-Las .... Gone is the time when anywhere was exotic or magical or mythical, or even remote. Shalimar's clown mask has been dropped, and his acrobatics have become a form of escape artistry by which he transports himself into 'our' world".[13] The first lines of the dedication poem in Rushdie's fable *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, "Zembla, Zenda, Xanadu:/ All our dream-worlds may come true./ Fairy lands are fearsome too", seem to forecast the tragic epilogue of *Shalimar the Clown*. Paradoxically, while that fable, the first literary work composed by Rushdie in the darkest days of his concealment, was his funniest book, a story which, as he has admitted, cheered him up during his enforced concealment,[14] *Shalimar the Clown*, the first novel of his to appear after 9/11, is his most tragic one, a story driven by political extremes and terrorism, a plot pervaded by a threatening fusion of psychopathic and apocalyptic elements. Defined by Shashi Tharoor as "topical and typical, a novel derived as much from today's headlines as from yesterday's hopes",[15] *Shalimar the Clown*, by showing a series of situations where nationhood and identities are not one and the same, indicates the inconsistency of freedom when contained by borders. Appropriately, all the main characters change names and identities more than once throughout the novel. It is once more Tharoor who notes that: "A recurrent theme of *Shalimar* is the transformation of identities, as characters change nationalities, addresses, professions and names, reinventing themselves, remaking their lives". Commenting on this attitude of his characters, Rushdie said that here, almost for the first time, his creatures "speak in their own names" (see Gandillot Thierry), like autonomous beings shaping their own tales. Consequently, even if, as Rushdie himself acknowledges, "the

[12] Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Cape, 1995), 376.

[13] Christopher Hitchens, "Hobbes in the Himalayas", *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 2005).

[14] Edward Guthmann, "Salman Rushdie Never Pulls his Punches", *San Francisco Chronicle* (9 October 2005).

[15] Shashi Tharoor, "Tangled Roots. Salman Rushdie Recalls and Reinvents his Heritage in a Story of Love and Terrorism", *The Financial Times* (10 September 2005).

question of how much our lives and natures can be externally determined has always been a subject for fiction" (see Boyd Tonkin), here, through his fictional figures, and in the light of his past forced denial of freedom, he digresses on the place of free will in a world where character is no longer destiny. The fatal question – 'Are we the masters or the victims of our times?' – becomes entwined with the more personal 'Are we the masters or the victims of our stories?'

Referring yet again to Iñarritu's cinema we could say that in Rushdie's novel the global multiple intercut story strands of *Babel* combine with the poignant and hopeless reflection on free will that is the pivot of *21 Grams*, Iñarritu's second film. Therefore, if in *Shalimar* as in *Babel* we are confronted with a post 9/11 ever-shrinking global village where life is coloured with the fear and loathing of international terrorism, in Rushdie's novel the associative temporal logic reminds one also of the disjunctive narrative puzzle of *21 Grams*, at whose core is the idea that choice is illusory and the individual cannot control destiny. While both *Shalimar the Clown* and *Babel* might be read as narrative digressions on the axiom that a butterfly's wing flapping at one end of the world can provoke a hurricane at the other, the open ending of *Shalimar* shows, as is the case for *21 Grams,* that it does not matter what happens at the close of the story, but 'how' we reach that point.

Not by chance, one of the protagonists of Rushdie's latest novel, *The Enchantress of Florence,* introduces himself at the beginning of the novel as "Uccello di Firenze, enchanter and scholar", specifying that he has chosen this name not as a homage to the deceased painter Paolo Uccello, but because in Italian "uccello" means "bird", "and birds are the greatest travellers of all".[16] Yet, since "a man who travel[s] constantly might lose his bearings" (16), he is always running the risk of being "spirited away into fairylands where [he is], and look[s], frankly absurd" (48). In a complicated and fascinating play of mirror and painted images, all the characters of the book reproduce this desire for, and fear of, travelling, this awareness that "One must stand outside a circle to see if it is round" (81), and, at the same time, this continual need to "begin in a different place" (100), or to cross half the world to tell a fairytale. It therefore appears rather superficial to define *The Enchantress of Florence* solely "a bravura entertainment" as some critics have.[17] Rushdie's most recent novel is much more: it is a fable of migration and of the encounter with different cultures, of tolerance and totalitarianism, a completely untrue story whose "untruth ... could sometimes be of service in the real world"(168).

As Rushdie confessed to an interviewer "When people first started to make a connection between me and 9/11, I resisted it because of the disparity of the scale. But I have come to feel that what happened with the *Satanic Verses* was a kind of prologue and that now we're in the main

[16] Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* (London: Cape, 2008), 14.

[17] Ruth Morse, "Beware the enchanted", *Times Literary Supplement* (4 April 2008), 21.

event".[18] Between the prologue and the main event, like in a Rushdie novel or an Iñarritu film, issues of global importance are mixed with individual problems, according to the disjunctive editing of human life. Yet if in the narrative world the main characters – and the readers with them – are obsessed by questions like: 'How many lives do we live? How many times do we die?', in real life the eponymous protagonist of the Rushdie affair has seen off all his adversaries, from the Ayatollah Khomeini to Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay, from Zulfikar Bhutto to his daughter Benazir. Back to life after the dark days of the fatwa, with his works and his testimony Rushdie jokingly sends this message to his audience: 'Don't mess with novelists'.

[18] Dougary, "The incredible lightness of Salman".